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TRANSITION TO BABEL.
THE LANGUAGE POLICY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Language is always a political issue, as language (and, consequently, language education) is the main instrument for the creation of a sense of belonging, for the definition of cultural and personal identity.
We are not going to discuss these topics from the point of view of political sciences, which have produced an impressive amount of literature on language policy over the last decades; we shall keep to the heading of this section of *Transition* Studies, i.e., "Transition and Cultural Heritage". We shall try to describe the main lines of the EU language policy (which are the result of a cultural rather than political choice) during this phase of sheer transition from 15 to 25 (+2, +1…) members, from 11 to 20 official languages, from two to three language families (romance, Germanic and Slavonic languages – and cultures, histories, religions…).

1. MEC, CEE-EEC, UE-EU

Names bear much more than a simple denotative meaning; in international names the choice of language(s) is extremely important from the connotative point of view.
MEC was the French acronym for the *Marché Européen Commun* which was created in 1957 and included France, Germany, Italy and the BeNeLux. The acronym MEC was often used also in Italy (where the Italian version should have been MCE, *Mercato Comune Europeo*) and in Germany (where *Europäische Wirtschaftsgemeinschaft* resulted in EWG). France had won World War II, France had brought about the creation of the first post-war European institution (it dealt with coal and steel), French was the language spoken by the ruling and upper middle classes in Europe – and so the idealistic dream of making something "common" out of countries who had mutually destroyed each other for centuries was generally called by its French acronym, MEC. And its 'capitals' were two French cities: French-and-German-speaking Strasbourg, where the European Parliament was to be established in 1991, and French-and-Flemish-speaking Brussels, the seat of the European Commission. English gained momentum in the

1950-60s, but Great Britain was kept out of the MEC (especially by the French De Gaulle) and English was no 'threat' to the French-speaking MEC.
Twenty years later the MEC evolved into CEE/EEC, including 12 and then 15 member states – and it was named with French (still in the first place) and English acronyms, a combination which worked well in most of the community languages, except in the Germanic ones. French was still the language of eurocracy, but outside the Brussels offices English was pervading European society as well as the global society.
In 1984 the CEE/EEC passed a resolution inviting all member states to support the study of two European languages in compulsory schooling, although no measure was to be adopted for those nations who did not do so. Two states were exempted from two-language schooling, the UK and Ireland, which made the main idea explicit: all nations had to learn (a) English, apart from the English-speaking ones, *and* (b) another European language. Germany reacted with an impressive action, carried out by the Goethe Institute, to train German teachers all over Europe, in order to support its language as the second foreign language in schools. The same policy was to be followed by Spain in the 1990s through the Instituto Cervantes. French started losing its leading position, and the descending curve was to build up a dramatic negative momentum throughout the 1990s.

2. The action of the Council of Europe

The Council of Europe is not a part of the MEC, EEC, EU; it is a cultural organization including all European states. One of its main projects was the Modern Language Project, launched in 1967 under the direction of the British linguist J. L. M. Trim, and Oxonian scholars of the Austin and Searle pragmalinguistic school (Gosrosch, Pottier, Riddy 1967).
The idea was to establish a *threshold level* of language knowledge, i.e. a basic level of communicative competence which could ensure survival (the so-called *Waystage* level) and integration (the *Threshold level* proper) in a foreign country. The main idea was that instead of listing words and grammar rules, the common ground was to be found in "functions" (greeting, introducing, asking, etc.) and "notions" (quantity, time, space, etc.). A list of functions and notions was agreed upon, to which "exponents", i.e. linguistic expressions in the different languages were to be added. This led to the *Threshold Level* for English in 1975, and to *Niveau Seuil*, *Livello soglia, Nivel Umbral, Kontaktschwelle* and so on in the following years (Trim *et al.* 1980; Trim *et al.* 1984).
The idea was absolutely revolutionary from the point of view of language teaching methodology, although many of its theoretical bases were not robust enough to support the whole building.
In the 1990s the project was taken up again on more sophisticated theoretical foundations, and the result was the *Common European Framework* for languages and the *Language portfolio* which described 6 levels of language proficiency,

from mere survival (A1 and 2), through B1-2 to near native proficiency, C1-2. Consortia were created by 'certificators', i.e. institutions who grant certificates of language proficiency (such as the Cambridge Syndicate, the Goethe Institut, and so on), so that "knowing a language at level B2" means the same thing in all the European languages participating in the project.
As mentioned above, the Council of Europe is not a part of the European Union, which only includes half of the European states, but the *Common European Framework* and the *Language Portfolio* were accepted by the EU as the language standards both in the schools systems and in certification; in fact the Council of Europe works as the EU think-tank as far as languages are concerned (a good example is Béacco, Byram 2003).

3. The European Union: a multilingual and multicultural 'empire'

The EU was formally born in 1992, when the Treaty was signed at Maastricht. The 1984 recommendation that two foreign languages should be taught was included in the Treaty as article 126 (in 2004, after several revisions of the Treaty, it is art. 149); a strategic document issued in 1995 (*The White Book*, prepared by a group led by Jacques Delors) launched the idea of Europe as a knowledge-based society which needed LLL, lifelong learning – which meant first of all lifelong *language* learning. Many recommendations and documents were issued in the following years, the latest being the *Action Plan for Languages 2004-2006*, which we shall discuss in detail below.
What was happening in Europe in the 1990s?
It was an unheard of event in the history of mankind: for the first time a group of states voluntarily renounced a part (a significant part: just think of the euro) of their power, of their autonomy. One feature of each state, however, was to be preserved and could not be handed over to the Union: the language, seen as the main element of a culture. "The difference of languages and cultures is a founding principle of the EU", as is clearly stated in all EU documents concerning cultural and linguistic heritage.
The idea of a multilingual and multicultural empire was not new: Alexander's empire was multilingual, multicultural and multireligious, as partly was the Roman empire: not only did Hadrian, like most members of the Roman upper classes, normally use both Latin and Greek, but he built the still-extant Pantheon, a temple to all the gods, as the Greek name indicates. The Ottoman empire, especially its capital Istanbul, was similar, as was the Austrian empire. But in all these cases the creation of the empire was carried out through military invasion and the invaded country's possibility of keeping to its own culture was a gentle concession of the victor, whilst in the EU it is a free choice of the member states.
This type of process is quite different from the development of religious or ideological empires, which are monolingual and have the *melting pot* as their

principle, from the Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic empires of the past to the Soviet and US empires in the 20th century.
Difference and multiplicity are valued differently in Europe ("a founding value" to be preserved) and in America (*ex pluribus unum*, "one out of many") might be one of the critical issues in the 21st century, as the opposing positions concerning the 2003 Iraq war has begun to show. The US motto *ex pluribus unum* focuses on unity, i.e. on the result of the process of unification: the United States are "united", a past participle, indicating that the process is 'perfect', concluded; children born in American belong to the *unum*, have *one* language and *one* culture. The European Union is not *unum* but *unionem*, which means "the process of becoming united": a process which will cost each child born in the EU the effort of learning *three* languages at least, of interacting with least *six, seven* cultural areas.
A fact which is symbolic: in all notes the name of the common currency, the euro, is written in two alphabets, and it is pronounced in some 20 different ways within the Union. States are giving up the right to mint their own currency, but not the right to call the new currency according to their individual languages.

4. A long process

The language maintenance policy is not the result of a decision of today's member states. In fact, it has been a long process.
As we mentioned above, the Council of Europe started its work on the very idea of foreign language proficiency in 1967, when there were only six member states of the Common European Market, compared to the almost fifty states of the Council of Europe. The official seat of the Council of Europe was still the only monumental building in the Strasbourg square where a few years later the European Parliament was to be built.
The actual beginning of the official EU language policy dates from later than the Council's *Modern Language Project*: in 1990 the *Lingua Project* (see below) was launched and in 1992 article 126 of the Maastricht Treaty stated that all European citizens are to be granted education in their mother tongue and *in two languages* spoken in the Union – all except the English and Irish who just need one foreign language, which can be made explicit as: "All Europeans must speak English and another European language". The latest expression of this principle is in the first lines of the *Action Plan for Languages 2004-2006*: "The range of foreign languages spoken by Europeans is narrow, being limited mainly to English, French, German, and Spanish. Learning one *lingua franca* alone is not enough. Every European citizen should have meaningful communicative competence in at least two other languages in addition to his or her mother tongue."

Three years later, in 1995, another important document was issued by the EU, Jacques Delors' *Livre blanc*, which indicates strategic lines for the future of the Union. The document states some objectives which are considered of paramount

relevance, and all of then refer to *Objective 4* as the condition to implement the others. *Objective 4* is concerned with language policy, it re-states the plurilingual perspective and the importance of learning at least two languages in order to meet all the other objectives. In the same year two other projects were launched, *Socrates* and *Leonardo*, which integrate languages across all the curricula and actions they fund.

One year on, and in 1996 the *Declaration of Barcelona* established the strategic lines for the following years: Europe must become a knowledge-based society. In more explicit terms: wealth in the future will not come from agriculture or industry (as a matter of fact Europe, above all Western Europe, had not been an agricultural or industrial society for at least two decades), and it will not come from a finance-based society either, which is too volatile as the reiterated Wall Street crises demonstrated. In the coming 21st century, the document said, wealth and affluence are to be the products of knowledge. And the circulation of knowledge in Europe requires the mastery of several languages. People must learn languages and, above all, learn to learn languages. Each country must have linguistic access to research carried out in other countries without waiting for translation into English; academic and research communities must have the opportunity to meet and work together without relying only on English, the lingua franca; university students, i.e. the ruling class and scholars of the future, must go back to the Medieval tradition of *clerici vangantes*, and the knowledge of several national languages is the foundation of a knowledge-based society. Member states were urged to implement article 126 of the Treaty through *positive* action, i.e., they were asked to invest money and human resources in languages.

In 2000 the premiers of the fifteen states met in Lisbon and fixed an ambitious objective: becoming the most competitive knowledge-based society in the world by the end of the decade. To do so, once again, the importance of languages was highlighted, and the "European Year of Languages" was launched for the following year, 2001: a series of events that also involved the ten future members.

In 2002 – by this time the *Common European Framework* quoted above had already been published and the *Language Portfolio* and official language certifications were spreading – the Barcelona declaration stated once more the instrumental role of languages in the creation of the cognitive society and set in progress the elaboration of the *Action Plan for Languages* to be adopted in 2003 (see below).

The development of increasingly precise focussing of the EU language policy had thus far been benchmarked by references to official documents and declarations. Yet, experience teaches that *declarations* – above all political declarations of general aims and objectives – sometimes do not correspond to *actions*. In language policy, however, European actions have outnumbered declarations, and by 'action' we mean processes involving spending, budgets, mobility, control over expenditure, benchmarking and so on.

Lingua, as we said above, was the leading project, in this area. There are other actions where languages are considered a fundamental component; among them the most relevant are

- *Socrates*, which has enhanced collaboration among university researchers providing funds covering both mobility and research and publication costs; the effect of this programme is invaluable: it has changed the perspective of European scholars opening up possibilities that were unthought-of earlier. Among the many lines of research, two are particularly interesting in our perspective:
  (a) the research projects concerning intercomprehension among languages belonging respectively to the Romance, Germanic and Slavonic families, so that "knowing a language" may also mean "being able to understand a language even though one cannot speak it";
  (b) the research projects aimed at providing language courses (most of them on the Internet) for university students involved in the Erasmus project and travelling to countries where lesser taught languages are spoken.

  Just to give an idea of the impact of this project, consider that in 2000-2002, the *Socrates* programme has funded: 1,601 joint language projects involving 58,500 pupils and 6,500 teachers; 2,440 language assistantships; 16,563 in-service training grants for teachers of a foreign language; 18 projects developing training tools and courses for language teachers; intensive linguistic preparation courses in a less widely used and less taught languages for 3,632 Higher Education students; 38 learning partnerships, and 12 cooperation projects to promote languages in adult education; 33 projects developing new language learning or testing tools; and 15 projects promoting awareness about the benefits of language learning and bringing language learning opportunities closer to citizens.

- *Erasmus*, a university student exchange programme, which in March 2003 celebrated its one-millionth exchange student. Young people who receive money to go to a foreign university for some months (up to one year) do not only become naturally plurilingual, but also pluricultural – in fact they receive a healthy culture shock at the peak of their formation years. And these are people who will make the upper middle class, and some of them the ruling class, in the next decades;

- *Erasmus mundus*, started in 2003, is an evolution of the *Erasmus* programme described above: it aims at attracting master's degree students from non-EU countries, offering them substantial grants so that they choose Europe instead of the US for postgraduate study. Languages are, of course, a primary aspect of this project as young graduates applying for *Erasmus mundus* grants in Slovakia or Estonia or Italy or Sweden will end up by

learning the languages spoken in these countries and will become 'living ambassadors' of these cultures;

- *Comenius* is a sort of *Erasmus* programme for schools instead of universities: exchanges involve teachers (not just language teachers), who must prepare specific curricula for the network of classes involved, and eventually engage students who visit counterparts in other countries, after e-mailing and cooperating for two or three years. Of course, teacher and student exchanges require a common language, which is not only English as more and more classes study two foreign languages in Europe, and so the possibility of using other languages than English is becoming real.

There are other programmes which involve languages as a major sector of intervention, from *Leonardo*, which funds exchanges of young professionals (120,000 transnational placements, exchanges and study visits for people in training in 2000-2002), to *Grundtviq*, concerning continuing education (and many retired people start their new post-work life by studying a language – especially Portuguese, Spanish, Italian and Greek, i.e. the language of sunny countries).
Last but not least, the *European Social Fund*, which is the EU's higher expenditure chapter as far as training is concerned, and is meant for the qualification of unemployed people, of young people who have graduated in sectors where employment is difficult to find, of middle-aged workers who need retraining to find employment in new sectors, and so on: in all these cases, the main subjects taught with these funds are informatics and languages.

5. The 2004-2006Action Plan

The title of the document is self explanatory: this is no longer a *declaration* but an *action* plan. It covers three years, and the fourth year, 2007, will be devoted to ascertain the attainment of the benchmarks stated in the action plan.
In this document, languages are not only dealt with on a quantitative basis (number of languages taught in the school system, number of students, and so on) but also on a qualitative basis, and this is quite new, because so far qualitative actions were proposed only under the Council of Europe umbrella, whereas the *Action Plan* is an EU initiative. It is not only the EU that takes up the initiative: it also clearly involves all the states: "It is the authorities in Member States who bear the primary responsibility for implementing the new push for language learning in the light of local circumstances and policies, within overall European objectives".
Among the most important qualitative elements of the *Action Plan*, the emphasis on life-long language learning must be highlighted:

- *"making an early start*: it is a priority for Member States to ensure that language learning in kindergarten and primary school is effective;

- *in secondary education or training* young people complete the acquisition of the essential core of skills that will serve them throughout a lifetime of language learning. Member States agree that pupils should master at least two foreign languages, with the emphasis on effective communicative ability: active skills rather than passive knowledge; 'native speaker' fluency is not the objective, but appropriate levels of skill in reading, listening, writing and speaking in two foreign languages are required, together with intercultural competencies and the ability to learn languages whether with a teacher or alone;

- *Higher Education* institutions play a key role in promoting societal and individual multilingualism. Proposals that each university implement a coherent language policy clarifying its role in promoting language learning and linguistic diversity, both amongst its learning community and in the wider locality, are to be welcomed.
  In non-anglophone countries recent trends to provide teaching in English may have unforeseen consequences on the vitality of the national language. University language policies should therefore include explicit actions to promote the national or regional language.
  All students should study abroad, preferably in a foreign language, for at least one term, and should gain an accepted language qualification as part of their degree course;

- *Every adult* should be encouraged to carry on learning foreign languages, and facilities should be made readily available to make this possible. Workers should have the opportunity to improve the language skills relevant to their working life;

- Language learning is for everybody. Only a very small minority of people has physical, mental or other characteristics that make language learning impossible. Provision for *learners with special need*s can be further developed and new methods and approaches need to be developed for the teaching of foreign languages to such learners;

- Promoting linguistic diversity means actively encouraging the teaching and learning of *the widest possible range of languages*. Taken as a whole, the range on offer should include the smaller European languages as well as all the larger ones, regional, minority and migrant languages as well as those with 'national' status, and the languages of our major trading partners throughout the world".

And in all these cases funds are provided in order to enhance good practices: which is more than a simple 'declaration'.

5. The idea underlying the language policy of the EU

The main idea is that national identities are absolute values for the Union, and 'national identity' also includes regional languages – however limited the number of their speakers – which must be protected.
Should language diversity be considered only from a practical point of view, undoubtedly it would be regarded as a problem: twenty official languages used in official documents and in official meetings do not only mean additional costs, but also additional complexity in organisation, from logistics to interpreters and translators. Yet, "the respect of diversity is a founding principle of the UE" and thus the problem is no longer to be viewed as a 'problem' but as one of the many facets of reality: Babel is one of the aspects of the complexity of the globalized world (Balboni 2002).
The bilingual personality is viewed as superior to the monolingual and monocultural one; the latter is self-referential, self-centred, while the EU is a multi-centred 'empire' and needs culturally open-minded citizens. A plurilingual person is better fitted for survival than a monolingual one in the new context envisaged by the knowledge-based society in a pluricultural and plurilingual continent.
In other words, bilingualism is not to be considered as an exceptional situation but as the normal way of being in the 21st century, as anticipated by Andrée Tabouret Keller in the 1980s; to use Anthony Mollica's celebrated phrase, "monolingualism can be cured", which implies that monolingualism is the disease, is the exception, and not the normal status of a healthy organism.
Above all, the idea underlying the language policy of both the EU and the Council of Europe is that the task of 'curing' monolingualism, of healing monoculturalism, is not a problem that concerns only teachers, curriculum designers, but involves also the whole society, from Ministers of Education to local educational authorities, from legislators to the families which choose a school for their children.
It must once more be pointed out that this philosophy differs from the one which has been gaining momentum in the United States for the last decade: not only the traditional melting pot model, but the neo-Conservative movement producing the so-called "English only acts", i.e., the trend to impose English as the official language of the States.
This contraposition between the two North Atlantic powers – who use the same lingua franca, English, but have completely opposite ideas about linguistic and cultural diversity – is not to be underestimated in this hectic transition phase from the post Cold War and single world power model of the 1990s and 2000s to the

multipower model which is emerging, putting the EU, Russia and China on the world stage together with the United States.

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